

# **14th meeting of the Advisory Committee for Social Science (March 2025) Minutes**

## **14<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Advisory Committee for Social Science**

### **19th March 2025 Minutes**

Location: Clive House, London, and remote via Microsoft Teams

Time: 10:00 - 16:30

#### **Attendees: ACSS**

- Ms Julie Hill (JH), Chair
- Professor Julie Barnett (JB), Deputy Chair
- Professor Seda Erdem (SE)
- Professor George Gaskell (GC)
- Professor Fiona Gillison (FG)
- Professor Charlotte Hardman (CH)
- Professor Spencer Henson (SH)
- Dr. Hannah Lambie-Mumford (HLM)

#### **Attendees: Food Standards Agency**

- Rebecca Gillespie (RG), ACSS Secretariat
- Kristina Diprose (KD), ACSS Secretariat
- Michelle Patel (MP), Deputy Director, Analysis
- Jo Disson (JD), Head of Social Science
- Willem Roelofs (WR), Head of Analytics
- Laura Broomfield (LB), Principal Research Officer
- Lucy Murray (LM), Principal Research Officer
- Sophie Watson (SW), Principal Research Officer
- Laura Gent (LG), Senior Social Research Officer
- Thomas Turner (TT), Senior Social Research Officer
- Alice Wootton (AW), Senior Social Research Officer

- Greg Wasinski (GW), Strategic Insights Team Leader
- Stefano Basilico (SB), Senior Trade Adviser: International, Trade & Devolution
- Aimee Harmer (AH), Senior Policy Adviser: Food Hypersensitivity
- Carol Scott (CS), Science Assurance Coordination Admin Hub

## **Other Attendees**

- Claire Nicholson, (CN), Science Council
- Matt Ensor (ME), DEFRA Social Science Expert Group, Secretariat
- Dr. Rounaq Nayak (RN), University of West of England
- Dr. Raymond Obayi (RO), University of Manchester

## **Summary of the meeting**

The 14<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Advisory Committee for Social Science (ACSS) included updates from: the Secretariat, ACSS Chair, Working Group Chairs, the Chair of the Science Council, Deputy Director of Science, Evidence and Research Directorate (SERD), and the Heads of Analytics Unit and Social Science. Substantive discussion items included: using a food systems approach to explore the impacts of regulatory interventions, consumer views of imported food, and a planned evaluation of new best practice guidance for the provision of allergen information. See Annex A for agenda and papers.

## **Summary of actions:**

**Action 14.1:** Secretariat to share the most recent Food System Strategic Assessment and related board paper with members.

**Action 14.2:** Secretariat to explore with Policy colleagues whether ACSS work on the role and measurement of public attitudes as a source of evidence for trade negotiations (e.g. via the Understanding Regulatory Change working group) is useful for informing current work.

**Action 14.3:** BG/KD to discuss the food hypersensitivity provision of information theory of change and evaluation with FSA Comms, to improve understanding of how the guidance will reach businesses and consumers.

**Action 14.4:** Secretariat to circulate the slides from all presentations.

## **Minutes:**

## **Welcome and introductions**

- JH welcomed everyone to the 14<sup>th</sup> ACSS meeting.
- Brief introductions from attendees (in-person and online)

## **Declaration of interests**

- No declarations additional to those already made. JH reminded members about being thorough when filling in the declarations of interest forms.

## **Actions from the last meeting and Chairs update**

- No actions were outstanding from the last plenary meeting.
- JH updated on the ACSS's work on quality assurance of social science projects and consumer monitoring surveys, supporting the FSA to develop the economic case for the impact of its activities, prioritisation of analytical resource, and scoping evidence around consumer views on ultra-processed foods (UPFs).
- MP updated on new work resulting from a Research and Evidence Programme workshop with ACSS and Science Council.
- MP updated on the FSA's involvement in a UKRI Public Dialogue project on UPFs and the timeliness of the ACSS scoping review on consumer understanding and concerns around UPFs.
- JH and ME updated on a planned joint SSEG-ACSS food systems event in May 2025, and DEFRA's current work on a Food Strategy outcomes framework and food systems mapping.

## **Using a food systems approach to explore the impacts of regulatory interventions (paper 14.1)**

- GW provided an overview of the FSA's recent work on using a food systems approach to explore the impacts of regulatory interventions (paper 14.1).
- Subsequent discussions focused on 2 questions:

### **What should we consider when thinking about development of a food systems tool to enable us to explore policy and regulatory options?**

- Systems thinking as a holistic approach that looks at root causes and effects, emphasising complexity and interconnectedness.

- However, complexity can be overwhelming – useful to consider what you want to get out of it and where to focus, e.g. systems mapping on the basis of specific research questions.
- Can think of systems at scale (e.g. the whole food system) or sub-systems that interact with larger systems.
- Tendency to focus on the nodes (or agents) in the system, but also important to look at feedback loops and interactions between elements of the system.
- No one systems mapping tool can do everything: what model you use will depend on the problem you are trying to solve.
- Disciplinary boundaries (e.g. different academic approaches) and institutions (e.g. priorities of different departments) could be a barrier to systems thinking. For example, reconciling food safety and socioeconomic goals.
- As a regulator, the FSA is not a passive observer, but a participant that influences the food system.
- It could be helpful for the FSA to look at examples of where systems thinking has already influenced decision-making processes.

**Are there any relevant examples in your respective area where a policy initiative has had unintended consequences? Do you understand why that was the case, and to what extent could those consequences have been foreseen?**

- Unintended consequences can also arise in a single system, not necessarily a result of not thinking about a complex system.
- Is the problem not doing systems thinking, or just thinking in silos? e.g. designing a food packaging intervention, without realising it will encourage the system to move to different packaging.

**Action 14.1:** Secretariat to share the most recent Food System Strategic Assessment and related board paper with members.

## **Afternoon session introduction**

- JH gave an overview of the afternoon's agenda

## **Working group updates (paper 14.2)**

JH gave an update on the **Understanding Regulatory Change (URC) Working Group**, including work to inform a review of evidence on consumer attitudes around potential change to the market authorisation process. Future planned

work for this group includes (i) supporting any primary research needed for changes to the FSA's meat charging scheme; and (ii) supporting the evaluation of the FSA's new best practice guidance on the provision of allergen information for non-prepacked food.

HLM gave an update on the **Assurance Working Group**, including peer reviewing four FSA social science projects through the Gateway process and reviewing approaches to reaching vulnerable consumers. These activities will continue, along with new planned work to support FSA evidence translation.

- On evidence translation, there was a discussion around whether Food & You2 (F&Y2) data speaks for itself, or should the FSA draw out the implications? As F&Y2 is an official statistic, the FSA must report it in a particular way – but could look at other evidence translation opportunities with this dataset, e.g. in its annual report.

SH provided an update on the **Economics Working Group**, where members have been supporting ongoing work to develop a robust business case for the FSA's impact for the 2025 Spending Review. Members have been expanding on a Rapid Evidence Review and Policy Impact Matrix created in phase 1. Future planned work includes mapping FSA datasets onto these resources.

SH provided an update on the **Wider Consumer Interests (WCI) Working Group**, including the group's published scoping review of consumer understanding and concerns about UPFs, support for the development of the FSA's consumer monitoring surveys, and support of a project to understand what external factors influence trust in food and the FSA. The group's input into the Consumer Insight Tracker and F&Y2 will continue, and members will also support the FSA in contributing to UKRI's public dialogue on UPFs.

- There was some discussion of different terminologies used in different countries and contexts, e.g. genome-edited foods, genetically-modified foods, precision-bred foods. There is low public awareness of this terminology. If the FSA wants to do research, for example on consumer perceptions, the terms should perhaps be explained before using them.

## **Secretariat update (paper 14.3)**

- RG provided an update on recent ACSS recruitment.
- RG gave a reminder of Government Security Classifications usage (Annex B), and end of financial year expenses claim deadlines.

- RG thanked members for ad hoc work to support FSA social science projects.
- RG also provided a forward look for the next financial year
- JH asked if there was any member feedback on the timings of working group and other ACSS activity. Members felt that current scheduling is efficient.

## **Science Council Update**

- CN gave a brief introduction to Science Council and provided an update on recent key areas of peer review and advisory work.
- Past Science Council projects have included looking at priorities for food hypersensitivity, and understanding the food safety implications of changes in the food chain aimed at achieving Net Zero.
- A more recent piece of work, on 'Wider Consumer Interests', looked at what concerns consumers have about food, beyond the known top concerns of cost and safety.
- An upcoming project will look at trends in foodborne diseases.

## **Analytics Unit update**

- JD gave an overview of the Analytics Unit (AU) and its range of disciplines.
- AU is supporting the Government's regulatory growth mission, e.g. newly launched Cell Cultivated Proteins (CCPs) sandbox. The team recently did a rapid evidence review of consumers' views of CCPs.
- WR recapped the AU Strategy and its focus on helping the FSA to make better decisions through sound evidence and practical advice.
- WR also provided an overview of planned 2025/26 projects.
- ACSS members asked how AU decide what to work on? WR and JD explained the prioritisation and Project Initiation Form (PIF) process – and how this is aligned with the FSA's Research & Evidence Programmes.

## **Consumer views of imported food**

- SB presented the policy background and the FSA's principles for trade negotiations: safeguarding consumer confidence & interests and public health.
- AW presented sources of data typically used to represent consumer confidence in imported food.
- Discussions focused on 2 questions:

## **What other additional evidence sources are there re: consumer views of imported food?**

- Discussion about how relevant consumers' views are in this context, when public knowledge and understanding of trade negotiations is likely to be limited.
- In countries with a lot of imported food, there's concern about erosion of trust in the safety of the food supply. The literature on country of origin and safety of products suggests issues of xenophobia and stereotyping – e.g. perception that domestic products are always safer. Bias towards domestic produce is mirrored in many other countries (with exceptions, e.g. China).
- Lower-middle income countries import a lot of food routinely and there seems to be less concern in this context – so what are the factors that trigger public concern?

## **What are members thoughts on the key findings identified?**

- Observations and suggestions about the research methods:
  - An element of inevitability to the findings (high public concern): what are consumers' expectations when they are asked these types of questions, and are they presented with any information on risks/benefits or what existing regulations are in place?
  - Qualitative research may be more helpful for understanding the underlying reasons/drivers behind consumers' views.
  - Quantitative methods such as time series and inferential statistics may also be useful for understanding drivers.
  - Previous studies (e.g. DEFRA ethnographic work) have found a value-action gap in what consumers say they want and what they actually buy.
- How do some topics enter public discourse and others don't: what's the role of food system actors?
- Could other stakeholders like retailers be more important to the shaping of a public narrative?
- Discussion about how much detail on consumer views is helpful to factor into decision-making, and what is the purpose of this type of research – e.g. monitor effect on public trust in the food system, but not necessarily for every product or country that the UK might trade with: so what are the general areas of concern?
- Fundamental question for the FSA – should public values be taken into account in policy making? e.g. FSA does risk and safety assessments, but

also looks at other legitimate factors like consumer concerns.

- Suggestion that there could be ACSS input into the role and measurement of public attitudes as a source of evidence for trade negotiations.

- **Action 14.2:** Secretariat to explore with Policy colleagues whether ACSS work on the role and measurement of public attitudes as a source of evidence for trade negotiations (e.g. via the Understanding Regulatory Change working group) is useful for informing current work.

## **Provision of Allergen Information: Best Practice Guidance for Food Businesses (paper 14.4)**

- AH presented the policy background to the FSA's new best practice guidance on the provision of allergen information for non-prepacked food, and the key recommendations in this guidance.
- KD presented the theory of change for this guidance.
- RG presented the proposed mixed method evaluation approach, and some initial findings from baseline surveys of food businesses and consumers.
- Discussions focused on 2 questions:

### **Is anything missing from the theory of change? Are there any problematic assumptions and/or any evidence gaps?**

- Positive feedback about the focus on evidence-based policy making, having a theory of change based on FSA research, and clearly stating the assumptions underpinning it.
- Positive feedback about the 8 key recommendations in the best practice guidance mapping onto the consumer journey, and the recommendation on all ingredients being available on request if possible. There is evidence that some allergens *not* among the 14 regulated are more common allergies, e.g. kiwi.
- Doesn't include counter-intuitive assumptions. Use *if... then...* statements to reflect different sets of assumptions for different stakeholders, e.g. *If* consumers get a severe allergic reaction, *then* they're going to disclose their food hypersensitivity.
- Missing detail on how the best practice guidance gets to food businesses – how does the FSA expect people to learn about it? Opportunity to link up



with the Communications team.

- In addition to risks and implementation barriers, the theory of change could also identify any mitigations that are in place.

## **Does the proposed evaluation approach address the research aims? How else might we evaluate the best practice guidance in a cost-effective way?**

- important to monitor the unintended consequence that the provision of written allergen information may discourage conversations about allergen requirements. If evidence emerges through the evaluation that this is happening, this should be clearly presented to inform future decisions about legislation.
- Baseline surveys highlight a gap between what allergen information consumers are getting and what food businesses are providing – is there capacity to look at what's happening here through qualitative work? Is it particular consumer groups?
- Discussion around the FSA's existing qualitative evidence from consumers, and whether any further research is needed for this evaluation. Suggestion that it could potentially be useful once follow up surveys are complete, if there are findings that are not fully understood through interpretation of the survey data.
- To what extent has the FSA tested with businesses and consumers whether they think the guidance is sufficient and right? What do they think is missing or unhelpful?
- The guidance focuses on 14 regulated allergens, but it could be that a lot of the implementation costs for businesses are down to 1 or 2 of these allergens, with little public benefit associated with these (e.g. if a smaller number of consumers are affected). Where is the significant burden for businesses, and what are the costs/ benefits for each of these allergens?
- The evaluation should consider any unintended consequences for where food businesses buy/procure from – could it have a negative impact on suppliers?
- Consumer baseline data only includes those who have a known food hypersensitivity to (a) particular allergen(s). There could be a positive spillover effect for consumers who are experiencing symptoms of FHS but don't yet know what allergens they react to. If allergen information is more easily available, it could help to raise their awareness. Reducing the cost of illness could be an additional positive impact of the guidance.

## **Other feedback on the presentation:**

- Discussion around the % of consumers reporting adverse reactions and near misses seeming high, whether this is influenced by question wording and tendency to recall negative experiences more than positive.
- % of consumers who did not see allergen information the last time they ate out and did not ask for it also seems high. Members initially assumed this would be those with mild allergy/intolerance only, but the data disproves this. It would be useful to understand what's happening here in more detail.
- **Action 14.3:** BG/KD to discuss the food hypersensitivity provision of information theory of change and evaluation with FSA Comms, to improve understanding of how the guidance will reach businesses and consumers.

## **Reflections on ACSS plenary format and AOB**

- JH thanked the Secretariat for a thoroughly prepared meeting.
- There was a request to circulate the slides afterwards, so members can respond with any further reflections.
- JH extended thanks to SE as this is her last ACSS in-person meeting, and also to Dan Rigby, whose ACSS term ended between plenaries.
- **Action 14.4:** Secretariat to circulate the slides from all presentations.

## **Annex A - Papers and Agenda**

### **Papers:**

- 14.1: Developing a cross-government systems thinking approach to better understand the food system (item 4)
- 14.2: Working Group update (item 6)
- 14.3: Secretariat update (item 7)
- 14.4: Evaluating Allergen Information for Non-Prepacked Foods: Best Practice guidance (item 11)

### **Agenda:**

Welcome

Introductions

Declaration of interests

Actions from the last meeting and Chairs update

Using a food systems approach to explore the impacts of regulatory interventions

Afternoon session introduction

Working group updates

- Assurance
- Understanding Regulatory Change
- Economics
- Wider Consumer Interests

Secretariat update

Science Council Update

Analytics Unit update

Consumer views of imported food

Provision of Allergen Information: Best Practice Guidance for Food Businesses

Reflections on ACSS plenary format and AOB

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